

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING THE EXPERIENCE OF LEADING

WORKSHOP LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES: SHELA ROTE, MIAMI UNIVERSITY AND KEVIN HONG, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

LEO GAFNEY

Shela Rote was a senior at Miami University, Ohio, with a double major in pre-med and sociology. In September 1999, when she was interviewed by Leo Gafney, she was serving a second term as a workshop leader.

Leo: Tell me a little about the workshop arrangements--the group size, how long you meet, and things like that.

Shela: Last year there were four in my group. We met in a study room in the library. This year I have eight and we meet in an actual classroom. So that's a little different. It's actually better. Since there are more, there is a little more accountability. With four, if one is missing it's like you're just having this little chat. But I think eight is about the limit.

Leo: What kind of training do the leaders have at the start of the year?

Shela: We are taking a course through the Education Department. Last year we did a similar course for tutoring. We had an orientation and met once a week for two hours and discussed things that work and don't work and how to get people motivated. This year we will meet on Saturday and discuss things like study skills and how to help students be more effective in learning chemistry.

Leo: What kinds of materials do you use?

Shela: I'm a little different, because I really get into this. I'll bring a model kit, or cut out different things from construction paper. We do skits. Like I'll get them (students) to pretend they're molecules. It's really silly, but they get into it, and they're never going to forget how hydrogen bonding works. We're learning stoichiometry this week and I'm bringing different kinds of candy to work on different kinds of groups. Anything to try to make it more like real life.

Leo: What got you going this way?

Shela: Chemistry was really hard for me as a high school student and I did pretty poorly. So it is amazing that I have the major that I do. But I was frustrated and didn't enjoy it at all. So I came to college with a really bad attitude, and didn't really want to take the class that was required to go to medical school. But I was taking it and Dr. Sarquis started doing all these experiments in class and so that kind of got me started thinking, 'wow this is real; this is cool.' So I started looking for ways to make it interesting. And then I started to really like it. I did a total 180 and began to love it. Then I would look for any way to make it more fun.

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Leo: So the workshop was a great opportunity.

Shela: Yes it really was. And I think maybe I am a little more compassionate than someone for whom chemistry comes easily. I know how hard it is. I think that a big part of the workshop is the discussion, like, 'Boy I had to work four hours trying to figure this out.' Because people think they are alone. So it is important to get students to understand the importance of group work.

Leo: Any other benefits to students?

Shela: One of the things that they get really frustrated about, but that is a big part of the program, is that there aren't any answers. It really is like real life. If any of these people are planning to do research, or even just work in a real job--there aren't any answers.

Leo: Do you meet regularly with Dr. Sarquis?

Shela: He meets with us once a week and he tries to let us go through it as a group, but he is right there in the room with us and he will say, "This is how you might want to approach this," to be sure we are on the right track.

Leo: Do the students get the sense that the professor wants them to be involved and that the workshops are important?

Shela: Definitely. I walked in this year and they had the self-test started. They were already excited and motivated, and felt like the workshop was important. It's because he built it up to be important. A lot of things that I was prepared to tell them, I didn't really have to say. Dr. Sarquis had already explained it. They wanted to stay late to do some problems.

Leo: How about yourself? What benefits do you feel you have gained from the workshops?

Shela: Originally I got involved because I am planning to teach later on in my career, and I wanted to find out something about what works and what doesn't in discussions and things like that.

Leo: Do you feel you have achieved some of that?

Shela: I think I have. I'm a big organizer, but I have found that sometimes I have to realize that the way the group turns the discussion is probably better than what I had planned. I really listen to them. And the more I listen to why they don't understand something the easier it is for me to make the next workshop more applicable to their needs and where they are coming from.

Leo: It sounds as if there are a lot of benefits to students beyond learning chemistry, such as learning to listen.

Shela: Yes, it is preparing them for their future education. Real education is not about listening to a big lecture. It's about discussing things with just anyone. It makes me hopeful that they will get some discussions going on their own. I told them on the first day, "This group is not just for meeting from two to four on Tuesday." I gave them all each other's phone numbers and told them to call each other . . . their professor is not the only person they can learn from.

Kevin Hong, a biology major, was a peer leader for General Chemistry at the University of Kentucky for the fourth time when Leo Gafney interviewed him in September 1999.

Leo: Could you tell me a little bit about the organizational setup of workshops--the size of groups, how often they meet, and the like.

Kevin: Usually there are seven to nine students in a group. This year Dr. Wilson has been able to expand the program to a lot more students than previously. We are spread out all over the campus, at a lot of different times. We have a lot of flexibility. Some of the leaders like to meet outside; some at the Students' Center; anything to make it more interesting. We usually meet for two hours.

Leo: How many students are there in the program?

Kevin: About 300, and about 30 leaders. This is the first time that Dr. Wilson told students that if they sign up for a particular section of general chemistry, they have to sign up for Chem Excel (the name of the workshop program at UK). Before it was optional.

Leo: And do you have introductory training sessions for the leaders?

Kevin: Yes, Dr. Wilson usually holds some sort of orientation. When I began it was easier because there were only 10 leaders. He could give individual attention to each leader.

Now it is more difficult. But we had an orientation where leaders like myself who have done it for a while could give our experience. Then we broke into groups to work out some of the problems in the first set. That way we could see what exactly it feels like, because a lot of us didn't participate in the Chem Excel program. Then he asks: "Did anyone feel awkward? Did anyone find it difficult to participate?" That way we get a sense of how it feels to participate. There are always differences in interest levels; there's always a quieter one or a noisier one— even among the leaders. The leaders are supposedly more interested and want to do the problems. But we had to think about the students. Some of the students taking the course really don't want to be there. Or don't want to be in the group.

Leo: And do the leaders meet from time to time now that you have begun the course?

Kevin: Dr. Wilson likes to get the leaders together once a week, especially now that there are so many leaders to share experiences. But he mainly relies on journal entries. He requires all of the leaders to submit journal entries—telling him everything: how they were doing, how they felt their students were doing. And I found it is best if you do it right away, when it is still fresh in your mind.

Leo: How about the workshops themselves? What would be a typical workshop?

Kevin: We first obtain the problem sets from Dr. Wilson. We hand out the problems to the students. Each leader has his or her own style. I've had to change my style according to the group. I let the group determine what its momentum should be. Some leaders let students congregate in their own groups (within the workshop group). Maybe the faster students would want to work together. Some leaders feel more comfortable being up and about, maybe at the board, being able to lead the whole group as one unit.

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Leo: Do you get the sense that students feel the workshop really complements what they do in the lecture?

Kevin: Yes, before there were only so many sections of Chem Excel and we would have students from all over, from different lecturers, and some would be ahead of others. But now Dr. Wilson has set it up so that those taking Chem Excel will be in specific sections. And in that regard we are able to have the problem sets correspond to what the students are doing. And sometimes he likes to include problems from old exams.

Leo: Do students feel that the workshops are helping them in tests and exams?

Kevin: Yes... in the workshops we want to give them some problems that are a little bit more creative and a little bit more involved(than those in the text). We want to be sure that they are challenging; and if they can at least get the right mind-set for these problems, they can do any problems.

Cite This Article as: Gafney, L. (2012). Workshop Leaders' Perspectives. Peer-Led Team Learning: Experience of Leading. Online at <http://www.pltlis.org>.
Originally published in *Progressions: The Peer-Led Team Learning Project Newsletter*, Volume 1, Number 1, Fall 1999.